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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS AND ECA

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SUBJECT: NEW ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY TO EMPHASIZE MODERATE  
DOCTRINES

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. The Sultan of Brunei has announced establishment of an Islamic university which will educate Muslim students from across Southeast Asia in mainstream Islamic doctrine. Brunei's government will fund scholarships for nine prospective Filipino Islamic clerics in the new university's first entering class in August, as part of a bilateral agreement with the Philippines. Administrators of the new university are interested in partnering with Islamic studies departments at U.S. universities; we will assist their efforts, as the expansion of religious education based on a moderate form of Islam can help blunt the spread of Muslim extremism in Southeast Asia. End Summary.

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NEW ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY ANNOUNCED  
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¶2. Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah announced in his annual new year's address the establishment of a new Islamic university in Brunei. The new institution will be named Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UISSA), after the Arab missionary from Taif who claimed to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed and became Brunei's third Sultan in 1425 after marrying the then-ruler's daughter. The university's first intake of students is planned for August 2007.

¶3. Deputy Minister of Education Dato Haji Mohammed subsequently indicated that UISSA will initially absorb the faculty and students of the existing Islamic Education Institute at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD). UISSA will occupy buildings on the UBD campus for approximately three years until its own nearby purpose-built campus is completed. Dato Mohammed (himself a graduate of Cairo's Al-Azhar University) told the media that the government aimed for UISSA to become an internationally recognized progressive Islamic university producing religious scholars and academicians through undergraduate and post-graduate programs based on the Shafie school of Islamic jurisprudence.

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MODERATE ISLAMIC DOCTRINES TO BE EMPHASIZED  
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¶4. Ambassador discussed plans for UISSA with UBD Vice Chancellor Dato Dr. Haji Ismael and Acting Dean of Islamic Studies Dr. Haji Mohamad, who sits on the steering committee for establishment of UISSA, during a January 10 meeting at UBD. They explained that UISSA was intended to become a world-class center of religious learning that stressed a moderate form of Islam and the integration of Islamic studies with other disciplines. It would begin operations with faculties of Islamic law, theology, and Arabic language studies, but was expected to offer courses in other areas as well. To avoid Islamic studies from becoming too insular,

courses would be taught in English as well as Arabic and Malay, and UISSA and UBD students would be encouraged to take courses at both institutions. A UISSA student interested in Islamic finance, for example, could take courses at UBD's existing Faculty of Business and Economics.

15. Dato Dr. Ismael and Dr. Mohmamed said this approach was meant to emphasize Islam's compatibility and integration with the broader world, and stand in contrast to the views of strict Islamic rejectionists. The government currently directed Bruneian students of Islam either to Al-Azhar or the International Islamic University in Malaysia. While Bruneians would continue to attend these institutions, the foundation of UISSA would ensure that additional demand for world-class academic study of Islam could be met domestically and Bruneians would not need to look at other international centers where they might be exposed to less mainstream schools of Islamic thought. (Comment -- Read: Wahhabism. End Comment.)

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES  
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16. The Vice Chancellor and Acting Dean expected the majority of UISSA students to come initially from the Government of Brunei's Arabic-language religious secondary schools. They hoped, however, eventually to attract a large contingent of students from other Southeast Asian countries. Plans had already been laid for a group of nine aspiring imams from the Philippines to be included in UISSA's first entering class. They would attend on GOB-funded scholarships under the terms of a bilateral agreement reached with the Government of the Philippines. Dato Dr. Ismael said that President Arroyo was quite interested in this program and had discussed it with Sultan Hassanah, who had personally approved the scholarships. Both leaders reportedly wanted to see more Filipino

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Muslims be given the opportunity for a mainstream Islamic education in Brunei in the future.

17. As part of efforts to internationalize UISSA and have it incorporate world-wide best practices in Islamic studies, the university officials told Ambassador they would be interested in more information about Islamic studies in the U.S. and possibly establishing student and faculty exchanges with American universities. (Dr. Mohamad studied in the U.S. and has contacts in Islamic studies programs at Temple and Cornell.) In particular, they wondered if there were opportunities for UISSA staff to spend professional internships with the administrations of American universities, in order to learn more about their management and educational approaches; they also asked about USG-sponsored exchange or scholarship programs. In reply, Ambassador provided a broad briefing on the Fulbright, International Visitor, and Voluntary Visitor programs, and offered to have the Embassy Education Advisor get in touch with more details.

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COMMENT  
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18. The expansion of religious education in Southeast Asia based on mainstream, moderate Islam is in the USG's interest, as it can help blunt the spread of radical doctrines which are often used to legitimize terrorism. The Sultan's initiative to establish UISSA is thus a welcome development, particular the intent to offer education for prospective Muslim clerics from the Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations. The Embassy will do what it can to help UISSA expand its ties with U.S. Islamic Studies programs, in conjunction with ECA and other Washington agencies. End Comment.

SKODON